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ABSTRACT

This monograph presents results of a study which investigated possible ways in which political science training could be useful in government agencies, research firms, and business organizations. The investigation was based on interviews conducted by members of the American Political Science Association (APSA) with executives and political scientists in a variety of institutions regarding political science-related employment needs. The major objective of this report is to offer recommendations to aid academic political scientists as they develop and implement graduate education programs at colleges and universities. The recommendations, based on findings from the interviews, are presented in outline form in four categories--federal government, state government, private research firms, and private business organizations. Findings include that government employers at state and federal levels value specific skills and political service over academic degrees, private research firms place a high premium upon generalist over professional skills, and private businesses tend to hire political scientists in staff rather than executive positions. The conclusion is that Ph.D. political scientists do not generally have any comparative advantage over MBAs, MAs in public policy, or Ph.D. economists regarding employment potential in government, research, or business firms. (DB)

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Matching the Skills of Political Scientists to the Needs of Public and Private Institutions*

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Professional Development Committee

May, 1981

*This is a report of work done by the American Political Science Association Committee on Professional Development since "Can Political Science Develop Alternative Careers for Its Graduates?" was published in the Fall, 1979 issue of PS.

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A report published in PS in the fall of 1979 raised the question of whether graduate departments of political science should and could develop educational programs which would prepare students for nonacademic careers. It was argued that this made no sense unless the subsequent professional work drew upon the knowledge and skills of our discipline. Finally, it was asked whether there was any recognition of and demand for those skills within government and other nonacademic institutions.

The committee reported the intention of exploring different institutional areas to discover possible uses for political scientists in each and gauge the demand. The findings were presumed to have implications for graduate education. Those inquiries have been completed in the form of interviews with executives and political scientists in a variety of institutions by members of the committee:

Policy Analysis in the Federal Government - Lester Salamon, The Urban Institute.

Foreign Policy Careers in the Federal Government - Elsa Chaney, formerly of AID.

Capitol Hill - John Ellwood, formerly of the Congressional Budget Office, now at Princeton University.

Private Research Firms and Foundations - Erwin C. Hargrove, Vanderbilt University and Byron Shafer, The Russell Sage Foundation.

State Government, Executive Branches - Thad Beyle,* University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

State Government, Legislatures - Alan Rosenthal,* The Eagleton Institute, Rutgers University.

Private Business - Robert L. Healy, Director, Governmental Relations, Atlanta Richfield Company, Washington, D. C. and Ann Matasar, Elmhurst College.

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*Beyle and Rosenthal are not members of the committee but kindly responded to the request of the chairman for help.

These explorations have not produced definitive results but the commonality of findings is so great and the variation among sectors is so plausible that we feel confident about the validity of the following conclusions, which are reported by institutional sector.

The Federal Government

1. Employers value specific skills over the pedigree of a discipline.

2. The skills most valued for either staff policy analysis roles or management jobs is the capacity to deal analytically with quantitative material in a way that reduces the margin of error in decisions.

3. Political scientists are not perceived as possessing such skills.

4. Political science, as a discipline, possesses the capacity for institutional analysis which economists often lack, e.g. assessing the consequences of alternative program structures. But, personal experience in government, with programs, is valued more highly than formal knowledge.

5. If the job is a "generalist" one (e.g. foreign service officer, congressional staff), political scientists have no comparative advantage unless they possess desired substantive knowledge or linguistic fluency.

State Governments

1. Professional criteria for recruitment are far less important than in the federal government. Political service and personal connections are also important.

2. There are jobs for program analysts, budget examiners and evaluators in the executive branches of state governments. The same emphasis upon skill over professional pedigree prevails as in recruitment for similar positions at the federal level.

3. The bulk of jobs in state government require substantive professional competences such as education, mental health, environmental knowledge, which political scientists are not necessarily given by their education.

4. The most promising legislative staff positions are with committees but the specific skills required are primarily those of the generalist, i.e. ability to be articulate in person and on paper. However, substantive program knowledge and social science analytic skills can also be useful.

5. Residency in a state is important to securing a legislative staff position.

6. The doctoral degree is not valued. An M.A. degree is considered sufficient for either executive or legislative jobs.

Although we have not undertaken specific inquiries, we assume that the propositions above apply to "public interest" organizations which serve state and local governments such as the National Governors Association, the National League of Cities and the National Association of Counties.

Private Research Firms (Profit and Nonprofit) and Foundations

1. Political scientists working in firms on government sponsored contract research easily cite chapter and verse of the contributions they make to research which are complementary to those of economists and other social scientists. In particular, knowledge of the effect of political and bureaucratic incentives and constraints upon program performance is likely to be slighted unless political scientists are present.

2. Research firms vary greatly in their receptivity to the modes of thought of political scientists. Such appreciation varies inversely with the reliance by the firm on micro-economics as the primary discipline.

For example, Abt Associates and the Rand Corporation welcome political scientists to a much greater extent than the Urban Institute.

3. Political scientists in research firms appear to enjoy work which is directed to specific problems and carried out by multi-disciplinary teams. However, they report that graduate education did not prepare them for such roles. They perceive most graduate students to regard such work as distinctly "second best," in comparison to teaching.

4. Research firms place little value on publication of research findings by their staff members in academic journals.

5. Political scientists in research firms feel no clear tie to academic political science as represented by the papers given at professional meetings and the journals.

6. There is little possibility of forging links between applied careers and the academic discipline unless the discipline, and its association, creates vehicles for the expression of applied research findings, e.g. a journal. However, research firms would also have to value such work.

7. Foundations place a high premium upon generalist over professional skills but disciplinary competence is valued for the generation and evaluation of research proposals. However, only a relatively few foundations give primary attention to support for research.

Private Business

1. For the most part, MBAs are preferred to Ph.D.s of any kind. Political science is generally perceived as a residual subject with which all generalists should have some acquaintance. In any event, the capacity for economic and quantitative analysis is crucial.

2. The jobs available to political scientists in some companies are staff, rather than executive, positions. We have the clear impression that a relatively small number of national corporations employ people to do the following:

a. Write interpretive studies of domestic political trends which might affect the business of the firm.

b. Prepare analyses of economic risks associated with conducting business in foreign countries as a result of political and cultural factors.

c. Work with federal, state and local governments on policy issues important to companies. A knowledge of the politics and bureaucratic implementation of programs is useful here.

d. Analysis of national regulatory policy such as monitoring and interpreting federal actions. It is sometimes recognized that neither lawyers nor economists fully suffice in this regard.

3. Firms have no knowledge of how to hire political scientists.

4. Political scientists who would have staff jobs in industry must also be economists.

Conclusions

1. The picture is not bright.

2. Political scientists do not have any comparative advantage over those with MBAs, MAs in Public Policy or Ph.D. economists with the few

exceptions of the institutional islands in which political and bureaucratic analysis is valued.

3. High evaluations of the mode of thought of political science are based on immediate utility to organizations and ignore the possible validity of research as a value in itself.

4. Political scientists have much to contribute in applied fields but the recognition of this fact is limited.

5. In the near future, there will be fewer jobs in all sectors because of the condition of the economy.

One conclusion would be that the APSA and graduate departments forget about applied careers in political science. We think this would neglect possibilities which could be nurtured. A significant number of political scientists are taking non-academic jobs. APSA surveys of graduate departments indicate that three-fourths of the doctoral graduates are placed in jobs each year and that 25% of these positions are non-academic. The surveys also reveal that an increasing number of departments are altering their curricula to prepare students for alternative careers.

The question for the APSA is whether we wish to maintain contact with the students who take non-academic jobs in order to help them maintain their identification with the discipline.

One difficulty is that we do not know what they are doing. They may surrender their identity as political scientists in order to get and keep work. Or, they may be adapting political science in unforeseen ways.

Although our findings cannot be construed as optimistic, they do suggest latent possibilities for increased recognition of the values of political science to applied work.

The committee recommends to the APSA Council that it first decide whether it wishes to develop a non-academic constituency as an integral part of the association. If it is decided that such possibilities should be explored, we recommend that the Council consider each of the following ideas:

1. Seek funding for a research study of political scientists in non-academic careers. This might be a blanket study of the social sciences carried out with the other professional associations.

2. Ask the Departmental Services Committee to examine new applied curricula and make itself the agent for the dissemination of ideas to graduate departments.

3. Establish panels at national and regional meetings which explicitly deal with the application of political science to contemporary social and policy issues.

4. Ask the Committee on Research Support to consider whether the APSA might not offer its services to governments and foundations in the form of blue ribbon panels of political scientists to advise on important questions. Such panels might resemble National Academy of Science committees but with a focus on institutional questions.

5. Charge the Administrative Committee of the Council with considering whether PS might be converted from a newsletter to a journal which would feature applications of political science to contemporary issues.

Such a journal might have a wide audience among public administrators as well as among teachers of political science.

The combination of blue ribbon APSA panels, an applied journal and consideration of applications at scholarly meetings might serve not only to bind non-academic political scientists to the discipline but create an appreciation for political science in several institutional worlds.

The above proposals are based upon two assumptions:

1. It is important for the Association to stay in contact with non-academic political scientists.

The rationale for such a commitment should be more than the desire of an association with a shrinking membership to stay afloat.

2. Political science has contributions to make to applied work and the Association should develop modes for such contributions.

The Council may decide that the departures suggested here should wait upon a systematic survey of the careers of non-academic political scientists. However, these recommendations could be valued by academic political scientists themselves, as a means of broadening the discipline, and we ask that they be considered in those terms.